

NAVAJO CODE TALKERS

Bullets and shells tore through the air as U.S. Marines hit the beach. On the sands of Iwo Jima island, any other World War II cryptograph or code machine would have been too slow to use in the heat of battle. But the Marines had highly mobile cryptographs, each with two arms, two legs, and an unbreakable code.

From the first day's invasion to the final battle a month later, the human code machines, Navajo Soldiers, kept messages crackling over military radios. *Gini*, the code said. *Behnaalitsosie*. *Neasjah*. *Lotso*. Throughout the dangerous combat, more mysterious words filled the airwaves. Finally, as a photographer took the famous picture of the American flag flying over Mt. Suribachi, the news went out in Navajo.



Naastosi Thanzie Dibeh Shida Dahnestsatkin Shush Wollachee Moasi Lin Achi.

Ordinary Marines listening to this babble were as baffled as Japanese soldiers intercepting the messages. Had they spoken Navajo, they would have recognized the words — “Mouse Turkey Sheep Uncle Ram Ice Bear Ant Cat Horse Intestines.”

But what could such nonsense mean? To the Navajo Code Talkers, the first letter of each word spelled out Mt. Suribachi. Other code filled in the announcement: Iwo Jima was under American control.

The Navajo Code Talkers were unique in code history. From 1942 to 1945, more than 400 Code Talkers stormed the beaches of Pacific islands. Instantly encoding and

decoding messages, they helped Marines win the war in the Pacific. Even today, their code remains one of the few in history that was never broken.

In Navajo, Memory Is Everything

When World War II began, hundreds of Navajo men volunteered to fight. Most had never been off their reservation, a high, barren plain stretching across Arizona, Utah, and New Mexico. There they lived as a separate nation, as many still do today. The reservation had no electricity or indoor plumbing, and only a few schools. Most Navajo herded sheep and bought from government trading posts what little they needed and could not make. They spoke some English, but the business of their daily lives was conducted in their own language.

Among languages that were spoken by only tens of thousands of Americans, Navajo was the language least likely to be known to foreigners. The language was entirely oral. Not a single book had ever been written in Navajo.

Unlike English, Navajo is a tonal language. Its vowels rise and fall depending on the situation. Change the pitch or accent of a Navajo word and you change its meaning. Each Navajo verb contains its own subjects, objects, and adverbs. A single verb can



Navajo Indians' graves in Window Rock, Arizona

translate into an entire sentence. In Navajo, one speaker said, words “paint a picture in your mind.”

The Navajo code was proposed by a non-Navajo, Philip Johnston. The son of a missionary father, Johnson had spent his childhood living among the Navajo and spoke their language fluently. Marine officers were skeptical at first. American armies had used other Indian languages to send messages during World War I. Yet because the ancient dialects had no words for machine gun or tank, the experiment failed. Johnston had a better idea — a language combined with a code.

At Camp Elliott, north of San Diego, California, Johnston arranged a test. “Translate some messages from Navajo to English and back again,” he told some old friends. As iron-jawed Marines listened in, their faces went slack. The words were not encoded, yet top cryptographers had no hope of deciphering them. Navajo itself was a mystery, even without a code. Soon, the Marines went looking for what they now call “a few good men,” fluent in English and Navajo.

Making a Code

The Navajo language contained no words for the horrors of war. Bomber, battleship, grenade — all were terms foreign to the Navajo. But in making their code, the Navajo soldiers rooted it, like their lives, in nature. They named military planes after birds. *Gini*, Navajo for “chicken hawk,” became “dive bomber.” *Neasjah*, meaning “owl,” meant “observation plane.” They named ships after fish. *Lotso*, meaning “whale,” was the code word for “battleship,” and *beshlo* — “iron fish” — meant “submarine.”

To spell out proper names, the Code Talkers encoded a Navajo zoo. Marines spell out abbreviations with their own alphabet, which begins Able, Baker, Charlie . . . The Navajo version began *Wollachee*, *Shush*, *Moasi*, meaning Ant, Bear, Cat.

Finally, Code Talkers created clever terms for friends and enemies. Lieutenant was translated as “One Silver Bar.” Mussolini, Italy’s fascist dictator, was *Adee-yaats-in-Tsoh* — “Big Gourd Chin.” Hitler became *Daghailchiih* — “Moustache Smeller.”

Test Time

With just 400 words encoded, the Navajo put their code to the test. They handed a message to Navy intelligence officers, who spent three weeks trying and failing to decipher it. Then, armed with a code and M-1 rifles, a few dozen Code Talkers shipped out to the Pacific. Two more remained behind to teach the code to other Navajo recruits.

The code talkers had to memorize the entire vocabulary of 411 terms. In code competitions

with non-Navajo marines, the Navajo code talkers always won in both speed and accuracy. Even the most complicated reports and instructions were transmitted without a single error — an achievement that regular communications men speaking in code were unable to duplicate. The code was so successful that the Japanese and Germans failed to decipher a single



Fourth Marine Division Code Talkers on the island of Maui, Hawaiian Islands, in 1945, shortly after their return from the invasion of Iwo Jima

syllable of the thousands of messages sent with it.

After the war, some of the code talkers went to work for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Others found work as interpreters, engineers, and construction supervisors. Still others continued their education and became teachers, lawyers, and doctors.

Navajo code remained a secret until 1965. In March 1989, the surviving code talkers were reunited in Phoenix, Arizona, and honored by the commandant of the Marine Corps. A statue was unveiled at the ceremony. In a language that needs no decoding, Marine major Howard Conner assessed their contribution. “Without the Navajos,” Conner said, “the Marines would never have taken Iwo Jima.”

Adapted from an article by Bruce Watson